

Owl among the ruins

By [Jim Friedrich](#)

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Fifty years ago on Thanksgiving Day, a group of friends shared a festive meal in a former Episcopal church in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. First constructed in 1829 as St. James Chapel, then enlarged and renamed as Trinity Church in 1866, the white wooden structure, with pointed Gothic windows, steeply pitched roof and tall attached tower displays the Platonic ideal of a New England church, the transcendent anchor of so many Northeastern towns. But its congregation had dwindled over the years. In 1964 it was deconsecrated and sold to Alice and Ray Brock, who put a bedroom in the tower and made it their home.

As Arlo Guthrie tells it in his song “Alice’s Restaurant” the new owners had “a lot of room downstairs where the pews used to be. Havin’ all that room, seein’ as how they took out all the pews, they decided that they didn’t have to take out their garbage for a long time.” So after dinner, Arlo and friends offered to take all that garbage to the dump in their VW bus. But when they found the dump closed for Thanksgiving, they improvised, emptying their load onto an unofficial garbage pile spotted on a side road. Guthrie was arrested for littering, an offense which would eventually make him “unfit” for the draft. Absurd but true, and Guthrie’s 18-minute song about it became a uniquely comic anthem of the antiwar movement. Many of us would sing its joyful chorus as we marched on the Pentagon in November 1967.

I thought about Alice and Arlo and old Trinity Church when I read [an article by Inga Saffron](#) about the fate of struggling churches in Philadelphia, “In the rush to build houses, churches are being discarded.” Her subject was St. Laurentius, an historic Gothic Revival church built in 1882 with the nickels and dimes of Polish immigrants. A prominent symbol of the city’s Polish heritage, but no longer a viable parish, it was slated for demolition by the Roman Catholic archdiocese. The property would be sold to housing developers.

It’s a familiar problem. When neighborhoods change or religious affiliation declines, church buildings often lose their sustainability. In addition, significant changes in liturgical understanding and practice make many inherited structures unsatisfactory

venues for the renewal of worship. Since historical preservation is not the primary mission of Christianity, religious institutions cannot be expected to hold onto every property in perpetuity.

But the decision to abandon a church building is not without impact on the surrounding community. What happens when a church's physical and symbolic presence is erased from the landscape? As Saffron writes:

Certainly, Philadelphia's archdiocese is stuck with far more buildings than it can use. But it's dispiriting that it has taken to treating their disposition as purely a business problem, compounding the community trauma brought on by the closings of so many churches and schools. . . . the city can't be just houses. It needs the punctuation of civic monuments—churches, schools, libraries, and even old factories. Without those larger structures to break up the relentless grid, our blocks would be run-on sentences, without meaning.

It's hard to imagine a Europe without its cathedrals, England without its country parishes, or a New England village green without its white church. And many residents of Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood have protested the potential disappearance of St. Laurentius. "Can you imagine Fishtown being Fishtown without it?" Saffron asks.

At a city hearing on St. Laurentius, architect Susan Feenan [argued for](#) the preservation of historic structures. "I have no delusions about this building being a Catholic church again," she said, "but a neighborhood without old buildings is like a child without grandparents."

However, if a building no longer functions as shelter for a living congregation or is no longer suitable as an enlivening worship space, is there an alternative to demolition, so that it may continue at least as an aesthetic presence and a repository of historical and cultural memory, without draining the Christian resources needed for mission and service?

One solution has been repurposing—the conversion of churches to primarily secular uses. In the last decade, 52 Philadelphia churches have found a new life without religion. Some of these conversions retain a community function, such as art gallery, bookstore, school, brew pub or restaurant. Some become offices or private

residences. There are many examples of converted churches on the web. Their creative adaptation of challenging interiors is impressive, and they are all alluring. Who would not want to spend time in these [lovely spaces?](#)

I confess to some uneasiness here. I feel a certain melancholy in deconsecration. A sense of loss. Loss of community, loss of shared symbols, loss of faith, loss of God. Generations of prayers and hymns have thinned to fading echoes. Spatial or visual symbols, detached from their roots like cut flowers, seem sadly bereft and disregarded. The meaning of the space has been disconnected from the intentions of its builders. One couple who has taken up residence in an old Serbian Orthodox church “couldn’t live with all the wall paintings,” and they covered most of them up. The starry ceiling, happily free of explicit religious narratives, did please them, so it survived.

I’m not saying the church should hold on to specific buildings when their day is done, no matter how many beloved memories they contain. Death and resurrection is the pattern we live by. Death is not the opposite of resurrection, but its necessary component. Sometimes we just need to let go so that the new may happen.

Even a repurposed church retains a memory, a trace of the faith that built it. And that trace puts a question mark to the depthless horizontality of materialist culture. Can you dwell within or among such places without pausing to wonder?

Of all the options for church conversion, the residential privatization of sacred communal spaces seems the most troubling. Places once devoted to public welcome and communal prayer seem substantially trivialized when their function is reduced to the personal pleasure of the lucky few. But make old churches into places of public conviviality and conversation, of art and music, teaching and learning, or feeding and sheltering the poor, and Jesus will be there as surely as he was in the midst of the old worship community.

And whatever happened to the former church of “Alice’s Restaurant”? After being a private residence under several owners, it was bought by Arlo Guthrie in 1991, who turned it into [the Guthrie Center at the Old Trinity Church](#). Reconsecrated as a home for all religions by his guru, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, it provides social assistance, communal hospitality, educational events, concerts and lectures, and interfaith services. Sometimes a building just knows what it wants to be.

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